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THE COLD WAR: A WAR OF WILLS AND VIOLENCE

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The Cold War: A War of Wills and Violence

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We've decided to destroy the Soviet Union;
bombing begins in five minutes.¹

The above unintended, on-the-air, radio remark made by President Reagan in the 1980s captures the frightening aspect of the Cold War and just how close the world may have come to total annihilation. However, since this destruction never came in the form of a Hot War, the Cold War has been viewed by many as something very different from real war.

But was it really? What would the renowned thinker, Carl von Clausewitz, who defined “What is War”, have to say about our modern day Cold War? Could he explain it? Would it fit the nature of war as he theorized war should be? In this short paper, I will explore and analyze the Cold War in light of three key Clausewitzian elements and show that indeed, the Cold War was a real war.

- Wars Are Violent. Was the Cold War period really non-violent? Does blood and intensity in war matter to Clausewitz?
- Wars Are a Test of Wills. Was the Cold War a battle of wills? How important is will to Clausewitz? Can it be sustained for half a century?
- Wars Are Won in the Minds of Men. Why did the Cold War end? Does Clausewitz's thoughts on how will can be broken explain what actually occurred in the Soviet Union?

Some Background on the Cold War:

Simply stated, the Cold War was a fight for superiority of values and the type

of society that would guide the world following the end of World War II ... Democracy versus Marxist-Leninism. It resulted in a military and ideological confrontation that lasted over 45 years, defined two generations, and shaped the world we live in today. In the words of President Nixon, it was “a struggle of titans, the like of which the world has never seen.”²

The Cold War began with the almost simultaneous “declarations of Cold War” by Comrade Stalin and Prime Minister Churchill in 1946, followed by President Truman in 1947.³ For the Soviet Union, it was a commitment to “expansion, world communism, and the defeat of capitalism.” For the United States, it was a “global commitment against communism”⁴ which began with the Truman Doctrine and defined American foreign policy for over four decades through nine administrations. The Cold War caused an Iron Curtain division in Europe between East and West in geography, as well as ideology; resulted in inconceivable, massive buildups of armies, navies and air forces; drove both sides into an competition to influence the destinies of the less industrialized nations; and catapulted both superpowers into accepting a nuclear stalemate strategy of mutual assured destruction (or MAD) where both sides could destroy one another many times over.

In spite of this “MAD” race for world influence and domination, the Cold War ended without nuclear war with the surprising breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 - it disintegrated from within. When this happened, it left the United States as the single, unchallenged, superpower and as the victor in a very uncertain world.

Wars Are Violent:

One of the most controversial aspects surrounding the Cold War deals with the intensity and type of violence that is necessary to define war. Clausewitz states

in his “trinity” in Book One that violence is an essential element of war’s nature. But must this violence include bloodshed? What about the intensity of the violence? Must it be unrestrained in intensity or, is the mere threat of violence sufficient?

Many believe they have found the answer in Book Four, where Clausewitz states that the “destruction of the enemy forces is the overriding principle of war” and that “such destruction of forces can usually be accomplished only by fighting.”⁵ With this as their argument, they exclaim that the Cold War was not really a war. No mass armies collided between the West and East in Europe as predicted, no Americans spilled Soviet blood, and no World War III erupted in nuclear devastation. The Cold War, therefore, lacked the intensity and bloodshed required that define war when great armies are involved in conflict.

However, those who espouse this argument that violence must include the complete annihilation of the enemy do so not realizing that only Book One was in its final form. In Clausewitz’s notes of 1827 and 1830, he informs us that he intends to refine the other books (to include Book Four) to conform to the reality that total destruction may not be necessary.⁶ Until then, these books “only deserve to be called a shapeless mass of ideas ... being liable to endless misinterpretations...”⁷

It is in his refined Book One that Clausewitz realizes and states that “war can have all degrees of importance and intensity, ranging from wars of extermination to simple armed observation.”⁸ The latter occurring when the political objective is most predominant. This sounds uncannily close to describing our modern day Cold War -- where the trinity of “reason” dominated superpower actions and inhibited each from risking the horrifying consequences posed by nuclear escalation and annihilation.

This answers the question of intensity, but what about bloodshed? Does

Clausewitz mean violence can occur without some sort of bloodshed? No, he doesn't. There is one passage in Clausewitz's unrefined Book Two that gives insight in how he fundamentally distinguishes war from other types of conflicts. "War is a clash between major interests that is resolved by bloodshed - that is the only way in which it differs from other conflicts ... {such as} commerce, which is also a conflict of human interests."⁹ Whether refined or not, Clausewitz believes bloodshed is the ultimate litmus test for violence in war.

So, did the Cold War involve some level of bloodshed? Yes, unequivocally, it did. For the United States, the Cold War propelled it to intervene in other nations' civil wars to fight the spread of communism. In the Korean conflict, it meant 36,914 Americans killed and 103,284 wounded. In Vietnam, it meant 58,174 killed and 153,303 wounded. It also meant invading Granada in 1983 where 19 were killed and supplying Afghan rebels with Stinger missiles to shoot down Soviet helicopters and planes.¹⁰

For the Soviet Union, the Cold War drove it to maintain domination over nations seeking to break from Marxist-Leninism. It meant an invasion of Hungary in 1956, invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1969, and invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. It also meant military support and advisors to North Korea and North Vietnam and secretly operating missile sites that shot down American planes. All resulting in countless killed and wounded -- the totals of which we may never know (the CIA does estimate that at least 15,000 Soviets were killed in Afghanistan).¹¹

For the rest of the world, the Cold War meant millions of combat and non-combat casualties. Yes, the Cold War involved bloodshed. It was violent.

Wars Are a Test of Wills:

One of the most intriguing dynamics of the Cold War was the almost limitless effort that both superpowers exerted to demonstrate superiority over the other. It often defied human reason -- from who has the best society race to the arms race to the space race to the who has the most Olympic gold medals race. Why was it so? What drove it for so long? Would it make sense to Clausewitz?

Clausewitz writes that “to overcome your enemy, you must match his power of resistance ... the total means at his disposal and the strength of his will.”¹² In essence, wars are a test of wills -- which is his central theme. Clausewitz tells us that the test of wills involves both the ability to overcome your enemy’s will and the ability to sustain your own will while doing it. For the United States and the Soviet Union, this can be clearly seen in their endless attempts to attain superiority in every area of endeavor that might somehow weaken the others’ will to continue. It also could be seen in their actions to strengthen and sustain the will of its own peoples to accept and endure the resulting hardships that must ensue.

This battle of opposing wills is most notably apparent in the arms race. Clausewitz says there is a need to have “an accurate assessment of the enemy’s power of resistance, in order to gauge your efforts accordingly.” But if an accurate assessment “is beyond your means, you can make your efforts as great as possible.”¹³ That is exactly what the superpowers did. To attain superiority in military might, both spent trillions of dollars on defense to checkmate and race ahead of the other. The sacrifices that resulted were considerable for both. Because the Soviets spent an average of 25% of their GNP and the United States 6% on the race to arms, their national economies suffered terribly and so did the prosperity of their peoples.¹⁴

For the United States, it meant recessions and moving from the “world’s proudest leading creditor nation to the world’s largest debtor nation - below the line of Brazil and Mexico.”¹⁵ The Soviets found themselves in a much more critical situation due to their centrally controlled economy that couldn’t respond and therefore, stagnated.

But how was will strengthened or sustained in the Cold War to endure these hardships? For both superpowers, it meant bolstering the wills and determination of the people in pursuing the political values of being in a free society or a Marxist-Leninist society. For the Soviets, it meant tight control of its media and its peoples. A good example of this occurred in 1961 when the Soviets erected the Berlin Wall and Iron Curtain to isolate its people to keep their will strong and uncorrupted by Western influences. In the United States, it meant constantly rallying public opinion and reinforcing it in government policy. An excellent example of this is found in NSC-68, the American blueprint for waging the Cold War. It recognized the importance of strength of will and included among its recommendations, the need for “mobilization of American society, including government-created ‘consensus’ on the necessity of ‘sacrifice’ and ‘unity’ by Americans to confront the Soviet menace.”¹⁶ Would all this make sense to Clausewitz? Absolutely! He tells us clearly that in war it is the value of the political object “that determines the sacrifices to be made for it in magnitude of effort and duration.”¹⁷

However, half a century is a long time to sustain will. In the years following the humiliating defeat in Vietnam against communism, America’s will reached an extremely low and fragile point. Its purpose seemed lost. Its military and society were demoralized and shaken from the hardships and losses of war. Its economy was straining. Does Clausewitz anticipate times when people’s will might wane in

face of hardships and what might be done to re-energize it? Yes, he does. He says “as each man’s strength gives out, as it no longer responds to his will, the inertia of the whole gradually comes to rest on the commanders’ will alone. The ardor of his spirit must rekindle the flames of purpose in others.”¹⁸ Did American and Soviet commanders rise to the challenge?

In 1980, Ronald Reagan, the great communicator, was elected president of the United States. He recognized the true character of the Cold War as a battle of wills, had unshakable faith in the American way of life, and as Commander-in-Chief began to re-energize that waning spirit in the American people to persevere against what he called the “Evil Empire.” He began announcing to the world that same year that Marxist-Leninism “was doomed to the ash heap of history.”¹⁹ He then rallied the will of the people as “God’s chosen people” and started the largest military buildup in peacetime, spending over 1.6 trillion dollars on defense during a 5 year period.²⁰ Reagan had his critics to be sure, but there is no doubt he lived up to the

responsibility of command as dictated by Clausewitz.

In the Soviet Union, no such leader rose to the occasion to re-instill will in its people. Inspiring Cold War leaders of the old generation like Lenin and Khrushchev were gone. A newer, more reform minded generation was coming on the scene. Yes, the Cold War was a test of wills -- on a very grand scale.

Wars Are Won in the Minds of Men:

One of the most surprising aspects of the Cold War was that it ended with the total breakup of the Soviet Union on 25 December 1991. It was unexpected,

unanticipated and shocked the world. No one believed the Cold War would end in this way ... World War III maybe, but disintegration of a superpower from within was not a widely held possibility. Why did it happen? Does Clausewitz's thoughts on how will can be broken and minds influenced explain what occurred in the Soviet Union?

Many experts on the former Soviet Union cite a myriad of overlapping reasons for its disintegration: the failure of the Soviet non-capitalist economy, the loss of faith in the Marxist-Leninist system, the futility of continuing the struggle for superiority against the rapidly increasing technological superpowers of the United States, the disproportionate prosperity between the East and West, Premiere Gorbachev's "new thinking" reforms, withdrawal of Soviet troops from its republics, and simple exhaustion. Clausewitz would certainly agree with these, but he would emphasize that they really form one central theme ... the Soviet will had finally been broken. Here's why.

Clausewitz tells us that "if one side can not completely disarm the other, the desire for peace on either side will rise and fall with the probability of further successes and the amount of effort these would require."²¹ In the late 1980s a point had been reached that victory over America now seemed improbable for the Soviet Union. President Reagan's strength of will and more aggressive stance had shaken the Kremlin and the Soviet people. When Reagan raised "the jumping bar" in the arms race to even higher heights, it appeared unachievable. Just to counter the defensive strength posed by his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) meant unimaginable costs. The Soviet Union had already been committing 25% of its GNP (over four times that of America) and to increase that level of effort further was unacceptable -- the sacrifices it required were too much.

Exhaustion was also a key ingredient in breaking will. The burdens of the Cold War had been endured for almost half a century. Soviet people were tired and increasingly fed up with its leadership pushing for more and more sacrifices. Clausewitz tells us that “the mere duration of an engagement weakens the force”²² and that it “brings about a gradual exhaustion of his physical and moral force.”²³ The impact of this factor on Soviet will can not be underestimated.

In essence, the Soviet people lost faith in the ability of the Marxist-Leninist ideology to take care of them. With the communications revolution, the Iron Curtain no longer isolated them from hearing about Western prosperity and the advantages of the capitalist system. Their new leader, Premiere Gorbachev, was of a new generation, schooled in Western Philosophy, who was now pushing reforms.²⁴ All of this culminated in their minds and a decision was made. Clausewitz accurately addressed this process when he said “once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow.”²⁵ Marxist-Leninism had been the object and 1991 was the culminating point in time to discard it. Will was broken. The Cold War had been won by influencing the minds of men.

What Does This Mean for the Future?

There will always be endless debates over whether the Cold War was a real war or not. This should not be so surprising. Clausewitz tells us in his most revealing and most refined paragraph in Book One that “war is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case.”²⁶ The Cold War is that ultimate chameleon. It will look different to different people. However, when

you investigate its true nature, you find the essential elements that Clausewitz says makes war a war. It possessed violence with bloodshed. It was a test of wills. It was won or lost in the minds of men.

A warning about the Cold War: Clausewitz also writes, “even the ultimate outcome of war is not always to be regarded as final.”²⁷ When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, there was an immediate euphoria that this act was the finale of 45 years of struggle and conflict. Today, just 8 years later, that euphoria is all but gone. Within Russia, the sparks of anti-capitalist and anti-American sentiments are already regaining in will and momentum. Will it ignite a another superpower fire? We should heed Clausewitz’s warning that “even after defeat, there is always a possibility that a turn in fortune can be brought about by developing new sources of internal strength.”²⁸ If we don’t listen and take precautions, then we may need to modify President Nixon’s earlier comment ... “the Cold War was a struggle of titans, the like of which the world will **see again.**”

END NOTES

1. *Why the Cold War Ended: A Range of Interpretations*, edited by Ralph Summy and Michael E. Salla (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), p. 33.
2. *Why the Cold War Ended*, p. 124.
3. Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War 1945-1996*, 8th edition (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Publishing, 1997), p. 39.
4. LaFerber, p. 49.
5. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 258.
6. *Core Course 5602 Syllabus: Fundamentals of Military Thought and Strategy* (Washington, DC: National War College, 1999), p.27-29.
7. Clausewitz, p. 70.
8. Clausewitz, p. 81.
9. Clausewitz, p. 149.
10. Casualty Data from LaFerber, p. 367, and Britannica Encyclopedia, 1967 edition, s.v. "Korean War."

11. Data from LaFerber, pp. 250 and 367.
12. Clausewitz, p. 77.
13. Clausewitz, p. 77.
14. Economic data from LaFerber, p. 315.
15. LaFerber, p. 315.
16. NSC-68 information from LaFerber, p. 97.
17. Clausewitz, p. 92.
18. Clausewitz, p. 104.

END NOTES (Continued)

19. LaFerber, p. 301.
20. LaFerber, p. 302.
21. Clausewitz, p. 92.
22. Clausewitz, p. 209.
23. Clausewitz, p. 93.
24. LaFerber, p. 320.
25. Clausewitz, p. 92.
26. Clausewitz, p. 89.
27. Clausewitz, p. 80.
28. Clausewitz, p. 483.

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